

Segalos and The Valencia Sinking Saga

By Steve Frangos

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CHICAGO- Historians of the sea often call the wreck of the SS Valencia, America's Titanic. On January 22, 1906, just minutes after midnight, the Valencia, an iron-hulled passenger steamer, struck a reef three miles east of Pachena Point on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Run aground within sight of shore, over the next 48 hours, the official federal report death toll lists 136 persons. Only 37 men survived the wreck. Every woman and child aboard the Valencia died in the disaster. David H. Grover, writing in the February 2008 issue of Sea Classics, captures the drama not only of the wreck itself but what followed, "[T]he

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demise of the SS Valencia, characterized as it was by struggles for survival aboard the ship, in the surf, and even ashore, was something out of a wild adventure novel that seemed impossible in real life. Yet it did occur, amidst chaos, rancor, and a high degree of confusion, which still persists in trying to examine this devastating tragedy more than 100-years later. The story has been told and preserved in the Pacific Northwest where it took place, but nationally and internationally the Valencia remains virtually unknown."

In this tragic sea tale, two Greeks are linked forever in the pages of history. One was and remains a misguided but undeniable hero of the sea. The other was an opportunist, who proved himself to be ultimately, nothing short of a fraud.

ANATOMY OF A SHIP WRECK

On January 20, 1906, at 11:20 AM the Valencia left the port of San Francisco headed for Seattle with a company of nine officers, 56 crewmembers and 108 passengers. In the early morning hours of January 21, just as the Valencia passed Cape Mendocino, the weather took a sharp turn for the worse. With strong winds and fog from the southeast, the Valencia overshot the Strait of Juan de Fuca by more than 20 miles. Just minutes after midnight, the ship struck a reef. Immediately after the collision, Captain O.M. Johnson ordered the engines be reversed but it was quickly discovered that water was pouring into a large gash in the hull. To prevent the Valencia from sinking in deep water the captain ordered her run aground.

One of the few survivors,

Chief Freight Clerk Frank Lehn recalled later the moment: "Screams of women and children mingled in an awful chorus with the shrieking of the wind, the dash of rain, and the roar of the breakers. As the passengers rushed on deck they were carried away in bunches by the huge waves that seemed as high as the ship's mastheads. The ship began to break up almost at once and the women and children were lashed to the rigging above the reach of the sea. It was a pitiful sight to see frail women, wearing only night dresses, with bare feet on the freezing ratlines, trying to shield children in their arms from the icy wind and rain."

The first complete account published described what happened next: "Many say there was a wild panic held in check but little by the crew. The passengers came flocking to the deck, and Captain Johnson ordered that all the boats should be lowered and lashed fast to the ... rail ... six boats were quickly filled ... with the voice of one having authority to give the order, called: 'Lower away the boats.' Given the total darkness and the pounding of the sea all the lifeboats capsized. It was later estimated that nine out of every 10 men in the lifeboats died. All the women and children on the life boats were either drowned or beaten to death against the rocks."

Only 12 men made it to shore, with three washed away soon after reaching land. It was from this bedraggled group that word was gotten out about the wreck. Within hours rescue vessels were on their way. Among the various vessels that answered the rescue call was the steamer Queen, the passenger steamer City of Topeka, the



wrecking steamer Salver, the tugboat Czar, the Orion, a whaling steamer and the tugboat Lorne.

Men went mad and threw themselves into the surging sea. The wreck of the Valencia is judged to be among the absolute worst in the northwest Pacific, not due to the numbers of individuals ultimately lost but the circumstances under which they suffered before death overtook them. The survivors clung to the wreck for two days and nights in the cold and wet within view of land only some 50 meters from shore and rescue vessels that would steam close to the wreck only to back away again in fear of being themselves smashed on the rocks. These rescue attempts caused the women clinging to the wreckage to sing the hymn

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Valencia: A Tale of Two Greeks



Immigrant John Segalos (left) was the greatest hero aboard the wreck of the SS Valencia (above), America's Titanic.

Nearer My God to Thee, for what was to be nearly 48 hours.

Using the last lifeboat 18 men from the stranded Valencia attempted to row towards the Queen to secure a lifeline back to the wreck. Faced with the tumultuous waves of an exceedingly heavy sea, the Queen backed away from the wreck. The 60 remaining survivors clinging to the Valencia could not help but see their last hope sailing away.

POPULAR HERO

Eyewitnesses all agreed that John Segalos, an uneducated quiet Greek, was the greatest hero aboard the wreck. Segalos, a fireman, risked his life half a dozen times. Twice, Segalos, with a lifeline, tried to swim ashore from the wreck. Both times the Greek was carried away by the undertow and battered nearly unconscious by the waves and rocks. He was dragged back aboard the wreck both times. Segalos was aboard the raft that attempted to reach the Queen. It was this same raft that eventually made it to the City of Topeka.

It was reported in The Wreck of the Valencia, by Clarence H. Baily, in Pacific Monthly Magazine that Segalos, on the second day, was "on the raft that was picked up by the City of Topeka. Once aboard that ship his efforts

description of what happened: "Tuesday morning about 9 o'clock three unsuccessful attempts were made to shoot lines to shore, but nothing could be done. That afternoon I volunteered to swim to land. A rope was fastened to me and I plunged into the surf. Before I left the wreck a passenger, a woman I did not know, came to me and offered to give me \$1,000 if I would get a line ashore. I told her I could not accept her money, as it was my duty to try to save lives. It was no use. I was simply dashed back by the waves, so I cut the line and a lifebuoy was thrown to me and I was pulled on board stunned. As the vessel settled, passengers and crew sought the masts and rigging. Many were swept off the decks. Others jumped into the sea, seeking to swim ashore. On Wednesday morning Captain Johnson told us the only chance for safety lay in the rafts. He urged the women to get into them. There were about a dozen women alive then, some in the rigging and some on the deckhouse. They refused to take the rafts."

At this point, Segalos "jumped from the mast, where I had climbed, and was helped upon one of the rafts. The sea was running heavy and there was a fog. It was about six

the sixth day his heroism had run its course for the Pacific Coast Steamship Company, and he found himself penniless, on the street, holding a number of medals. As it turns out, that summer, Segalos was being considered for a Carnegie Medal, which also included a \$10,000 honorarium. But these were difficult months for Segalos. Heroism and all the attention it brought did not sit well with this Greek sailor.

"A nervous wreck and absolutely penniless, Segalos was advised by many well-meaning friends to accept one of the many vaudeville offers which had been tendered him. That he did not jump at these local managers will testify." Then, as the Fairbanks Evening News reported, "came the villain, in the shape of a fellow countryman, the Greek Alex Pantages, who was running a 10-cent vaudeville show. Pantages got hold of Segalos and explained to him in their mother tongue that the most heroic thing Segalos could do would be to go on the vaudeville stage. "The temptation to make money - not for himself, but for his poor old mother, his many friends say - finally overcame him and he accepted." Pantages signed Segalos for a week in Seattle and a week in Portland, at what looked like big money to Segalos, and the crime was perpetuated. Pantages taught Segalos a few sentences in English and Segalos advanced to the footlights. In Seattle, carefully guarded by Pantages, Segalos went through the week. In Portland he appeared one night, after which an honest Greek sought him out and explained to Segalos the position he was placing himself in, and Segalos never made another appearance on the stage." He received about \$10 a night and, with some advances, made less than \$300 in all.

Segalos immediately went back to Seattle and told his story to the press, presumably through translators, about how

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to aid his fellows never abated, and he worked for hours trying to get back to the wreck." Segalos never gave up even after the Valencia went to pieces. He urged rescue vessels to search for survivors in the sea.

It is always reported that Segalos could neither speak nor write English. This is critical to note given the fact that it was his interview to an Associated Press correspondent that went out across the world on January 29. Was there another Greek sailor among the survivors or aboard the tugboat Lorne where this interview took place? It was also reported that Segalos spoke to passengers aboard the wrecked ship and he gave this

hours afterward that we were picked up by the Topeka and we received every care and attention on that vessel. Segalos was transferred to the Lorne so that he might be of service in guiding that vessel to the location of the wreck." Wreckage, cargo and bodies were strewn for miles along the coastline.

EXPLOITATION OF VALOR

Segalos was taken to Seattle where he was given a hero's welcome. The local Chamber of Commerce and other societies and organizations quickly bestowed 10 different medals of valor on him. His employer, the Pacific Coast Steamship Company, paid for his stay of five days in a deluxe hotel. Then on

Pantages had taken advantage of him. After his public confession, an ashamed Segalos signed on a ship and went to sea. But the damage was done. The Carnegie Fund Commission decided since Segalos had gone on to the vaudeville stage he could not receive their award. This caused an outcry from journalists up and down the Pacific Coast. Always his strong defender, the Fairbanks Evening News proclaimed: "Segalos IS a hero—a greater hero than all the Carnegie money could ever make." Not everything can be bought with gold coins. For as long as tales of sea are told the bravery and daring of John Segalos will be remembered.